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Afghanistan's Expanded Opium Trade: Byproduct of War

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An Intelligence Assessment

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September 1985

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by
Strategic Narcotics/Eurasia-Africa Branch, Office of Global Issues. Assistance was provided by
the Analytic Support Group. It was coordinated with the Department of State and the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis Division, OGI

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 15 August 1985 was used in this report.

Afghanistan's narcotics industry has expanded since the Soviet invasion, and we anticipate continued growth. Economic disruptions caused by the Soviet invasion and the wartime environment have substantially increased the attractiveness of opium poppy cultivation, heroin refining, and narcotics smuggling. Poppy cultivation is expanding and probably will stimulate further narcotics trafficking and processing activities. Many Afghans have long grown and smuggled narcotics, and individuals loosely associated with insurgent groups probably participate in the trade. Available evidence, however, does not indicate large-scale, organized exploitation by the insurgents.

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We judge that the Afghan Government is unlikely to crack down on poppy farmers, laboratory operators, and narcotics traffickers. Indeed, UN officials believe that much of their financial and technical aid is being used to fight the insurgents rather than to attack the narcotics trade. Moreover, Afghan authorities at all levels are willing to aid traffickers for a price.

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Even if the Afghan Government were to institute control programs, the narcotics trade would be difficult to suppress because most of the activity takes place in insurgent-controlled areas beyond Kabul's authority. Moreover, the Soviet-backed Karmal regime is preoccupied with combating the insurgency, and as long as the narcotics trade neither finances the insurgents' efforts nor seriously affects the Soviet military campaign, government authorities have little incentive to curtail an activity that helps to keep the economy afloat. Increased Soviet concern over drug abuse by troops, however, could encourage interdiction efforts, at least in the cities where authorities are able to exercise control.

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Afghanistan's role as a heroin supplier to international markets probably will expand as long as the instability and strife continue. In the absence of any concerted effort at narcotics control within Afghanistan, the ability of neighboring authorities to intensify their interdiction efforts offers the only alternative for limiting Afghan narcotics exports. We do not expect Iran to move decisively against narcotics traffickers; but Pakistan may step up enforcement, at least in some cities, to stem its rising drug abuse.

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Afghanistan's Expanded Opium Trade: Byproduct of War

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Introduction

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 disrupted incipient government narcotics control programs and gave rise to insurgent warfare in opium-producing areas. It also drastically reduced reporting on the narcotics trade severely restricting our ability to assess narcotics production and trafficking in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, our analysis of limited reporting still available suggests that the disruptions of traditional social and economic patterns in the country have not hampered and may have even stimulated new growth in the narcotics industry.

The War: Incentives for the Opium Industry

The predominantly agrarian Afghan economy has been seriously hurt by the Soviet hostilities: irrigation networks are being neglected, distribution and marketing systems disrupted, and a significant part of the labor force has taken flight or been displaced. The small industrial sector also has been plagued by labor and raw material shortages, frequent power blackouts, and fuel rationing, severely disrupting trade and commerce. Such unsettlement does not always have similar negative effects on illegal economic activities—black-marketeering or smuggling, for example—and, indeed, the evidence suggests that the civil war environment in Afghanistan has spawned a flourishing opium trade.

Opium poppies are an ideal cash crop for subsistence farmers when wartime conditions disrupt commerce in traditional crops. They are a hearty, multi-purpose crop that yield a variety of products besides opium gum. The seeds can be eaten whole or processed into poppyseed cake or edible oil, the seed pods can be used for medicines or liquor, the straw for fuel, and the resulting ash for soap. Since opium does not spoil, it can be stored or stockpiled indefinitely. Profits from selling opium are as much as two to three times more than the next most profitable crop, yet cultivation costs are low.

Drug Abuse by Soviet Troops

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Drug use among the Soviet troops is a growing problem. widespread hashish use and at least the start of heroin addiction. the Soviets frequently sell boots, clothing, and ammunition to shopkeepers in the bazaar in return for drugs assaults and robberies of bus passengers by Soviet soldiers were commonplace before the drivers started carrying adequate supplies of drugs to bribe the soldiers when stopped at checkpoints. As proof of the contention that Soviet troops are becoming increasingly desperate for drugs, the bazaars where one could see an abundance of Soviet gear, especially field jackets, all swapped by soldiers in exchange for drugs.

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Isolated incidents suggest the Soviets believe that drug abuse has impaired the performance of their troops in Afghanistan, but there is no evidence that drug abuse alone has lessened the overall military readiness of the forces. The problem probably is not as severe as the infectious diseases and alcoholism among both the troops and the officers. Drug usage, however, could become more of a problem for the Soviets as troops on rotation out of Afghanistan bring the narcotics into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Some East European countries have attributed an increase in hashish use to Soviet troops reassigned there from Afghanistan.

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Wartime disruptions, in our view, also make heroin refining an attractive enterprise. Heroin is more profitable than opium—1 kilogram of heroin is worth substantially more than the 10 kilograms of opium used to produce it. It is less bulky to transport and more easily concealed than opium, and the processing

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laboratories are small, simple to start up, difficult to locate, and easily moved. War also produces a potential new source of demand for refined opiates—the soldier.

Smugglers and merchants have similar incentives to move into the opium trade. War disrupts regular trade patterns and encourages smuggling. Smugglers regularly operate outside normal distribution and transportation networks, and the disruptions enhance their ability to travel surreptitiously and to bribe officials. Although the war increases demand for smugglers' services, it also adds to their risks, which encourages them to turn to high-profit, illicit contraband. Merchants, finding their established markets adversely affected, also seek alternative commodities, such as opium and heroin, to trade.

Afghanistan's Expanded Opium Trade: The Evidence

Part of the case for Afghanistan's expanded opium trade depends on circumstantial, uncorroborated, or secondhand information. The frequency of the reporting and the nature and number of allegations, however, strongly suggest that the opium trade continues unabated. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and State Department reporting, indicates that Afghan farmers are cultivating opium poppies throughout the country, that heroin is now being refined in Afghan laboratories, and that Afghan smugglers are taking advantage of the insurgency to increase their involvement in the drug trade.

Cultivation. A wide variety of evidence indicates poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is becoming more widespread (figure 1). Reporting from Islamabad, Pakistan, predicts that the 1985 opium crop in Afghanistan may be 25 percent greater than that for 1984, which by our estimate was 140 to 180 metric tons.[1] DEA reporting claims that individual farmers are devoting a higher percentage of their acreage to poppies in traditional growing regions, and more farmers in these areas are sowing poppies.

poppies are even cultivated in nontraditional growing areas

reports of increased acreage to poppies in traditional growing Nangarhar Province, the major producing region, reveals that in some areas of the province approximately 50 to 70 percent of the cultivated fields are planted to poppy, compared to 30 to 40 percent last year (figure 2). Nangarhar traditionally accounts for about two-thirds of all poppyfields in the country, and, if opium production in Nangarhar has more than doubled, Afghanistan's total production for 1985 may be as high as 300 metric tons. A count of poppyfields in other provinces indicates similar increases in the number of fields of poppy. We are unable to confirm the expansion of poppies to nontraditional areas. Nevertheless, we believe that the expansion in traditional areas alone is sufficient to boost production this year by at least 70 percent.

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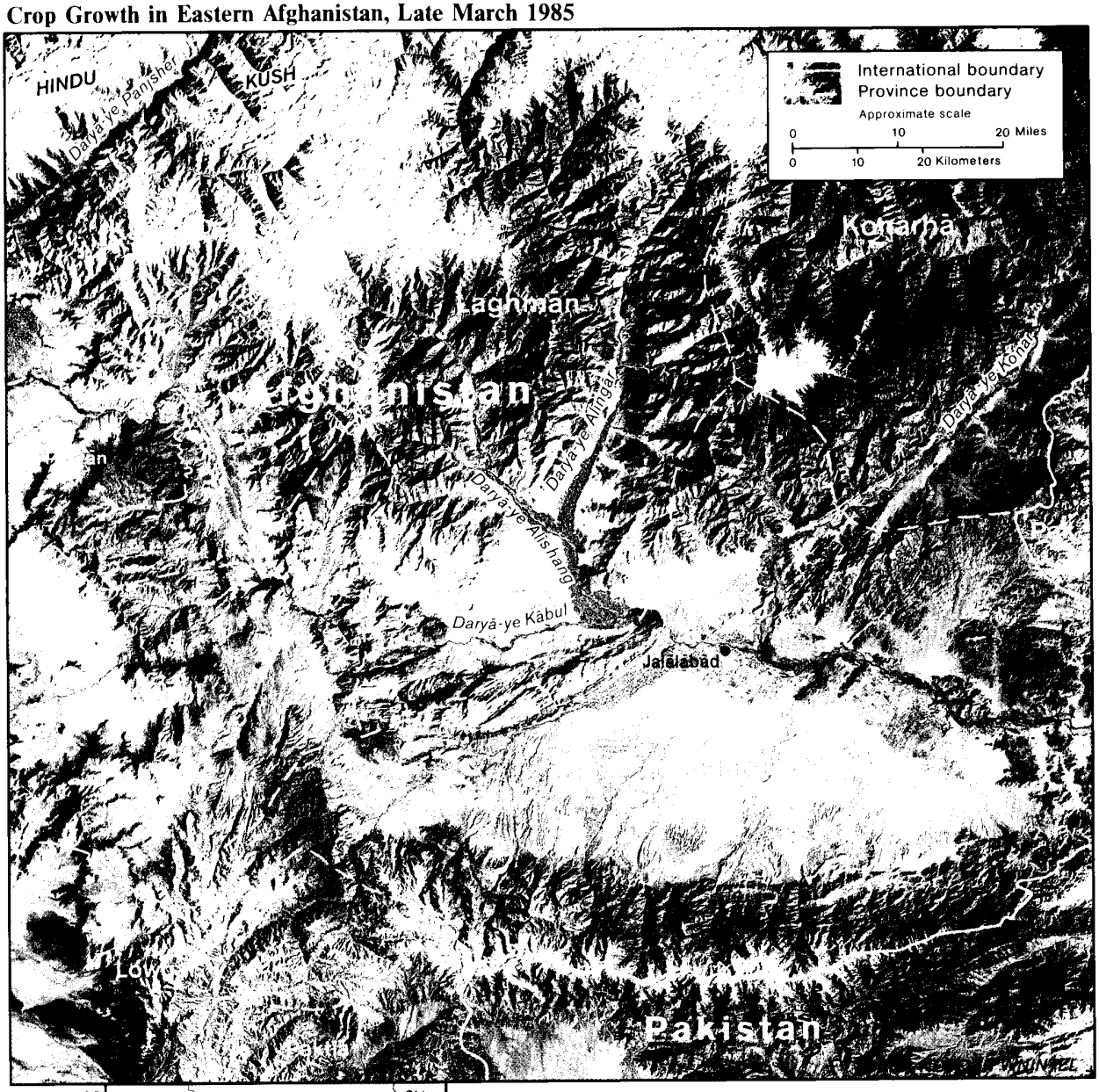
Figure 2
Crop Growth in Eastern Afghanistan, Late March 1985



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This Landsat scene centers on Nangarhār Province in eastern Afghanistan where nearly two-thirds of the poppy crop is cultivated. Snowmelt feeds the irrigation networks here, and this image, taken shortly before poppy flowering, reveals ample snowfall in the mountains. Contrary to reports of a drought during this year's growing season, the deep red coloring in the valleys indicates high crop vigor and the prospects for good yields. Opium is a major cash crop here [redacted] about 50 to 70 percent of the cultivated fields were planted to poppy in some areas this year. Jalālābād, seen in the middle of the image, is a major market center in the opium-marketing chain. [redacted]

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Figure 3
Areas of Poppy Cultivation and Major Military Activity

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We suspect that poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is unaffected by the war, largely because of the nature of the fighting. Most of Afghanistan's poppy is cultivated in small, scattered fields in remote mountain valleys away from Soviet and government military operations, which have been directed mostly against specific, accessible targets along main roads or near important towns (figure 3).[2] Many operations are focused attempts to relieve besieged garrisons or halt insurgent infiltration along the Afghan-Pakistani border or the Afghan-Iranian frontier. The use of airpower also has limited combat on the ground that could have disrupted poppy planting or opium harvesting (figure 4). Government operations in the past year suggest less interest than before in acquiring control over remote rural areas and more willingness to countenance insurgent control there, or at least a low level of activity.

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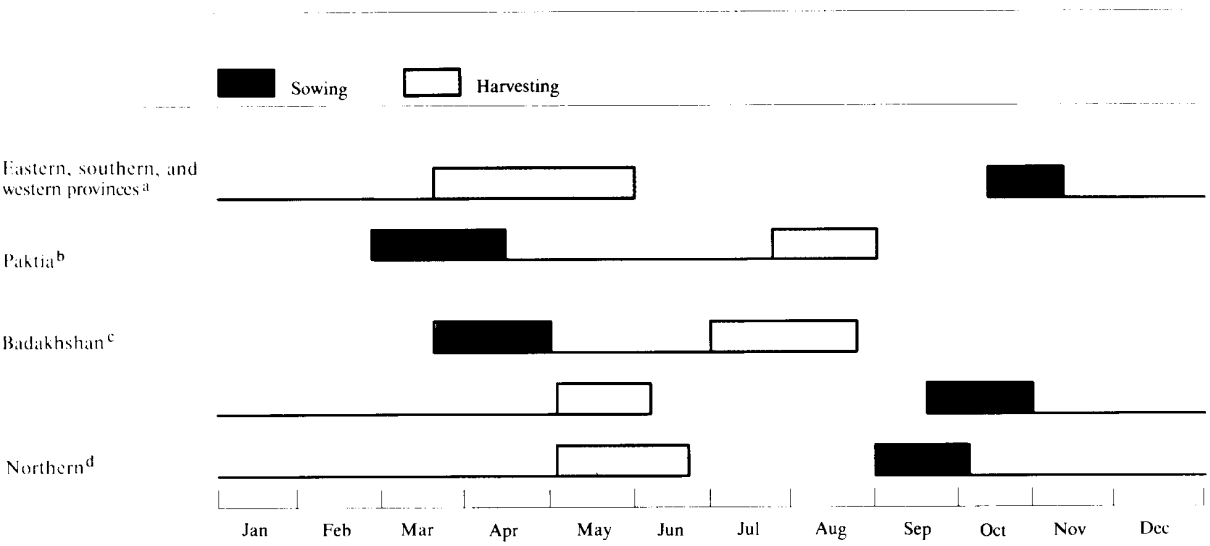
Figure 4
The Poppy Season in Afghanistan



[a] Confirmed for Kabul, Nangarhar, Konarha, Laghman, Lowgar, Kapisa, Helmand and Oruzgan Provinces. Probably similar in Herat.

[c] Spring sowing and summer harvesting is likely characteristic of much of the poppy crop, but possibly some is grown as a winter crop.

[d] Confirmed

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supports these conclusions about the likely impact of military operations on poppy cultivation. no signs of widespread crop burning or destruction of irrigation systems; bomb damage and craters are seen most often in villages and along roadways. We estimate that the destruction of crops and farms caused by military operations affects only a small portion of cultivated land, less than 1 percent of total farm crop areas observed on satellite imagery.[3] We judge that the rugged landscape and numerous irrigation ditches restrict access to fields in remote areas to foot soldiers or heliborne troops, who are more concerned with the battle at hand than with destroying poppyfields.

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The manner in which insurgents conduct their operations limits the effects of the war on agriculture. At times it appears the insurgents deliberately divert their operations from farming areas and from their sometime supporters. Operating in small mobile bands, they have engaged Soviet and government forces in brief, confined battles. Generally, insurgents attack regime garrisons, Soviet installations, radar

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The War in the Poppy-Growing Provinces

Analysis of several military operations in poppy-growing regions during the fall of 1984 and early spring of 1985 illustrates why the hostilities probably have little negative effect on poppy planting or harvesting:

- *Kabul increased its military operations in mid-October 1984 in* ***Nangarhar Province*** *and continued at that level of activity through the end of the year. Major battles during this time of the year could have limited sowing and damaged seedlings, but most of the activity was aimed at relieving garrisons and interdicting insurgent supply caravans and occurred near major roadways crossing the Afghan-Pakistani border rather than in the countryside.*

- ***Lowgar Province*** *was the site of similar military efforts late in 1984, but* [redacted] *the operations were primarily along important supply routes and did not affect farming areas away from the roads.*

- *From the end of 1984 through early 1985 there was heavy fighting in* ***Herat Province****. Although we know little about the poppy crop in Herat, we doubt that it was affected if the Soviets used the same tactics as used in Lowgar and Nangarhar Provinces.*

- ***Qandahar Province*** *was the scene of heavy fighting in January 1985, but the activity was limited to insurgent attacks against the airport, Soviet and government posts, a Soviet military convoy, and daily skirmishes in the bazaar. The Soviets responded by bombing nearby villages, but we doubt major damage was inflicted on the more remotely located poppyfields.*

- *In late March 1985 insurgents attacked an Afghan base northeast of Lashkar Gah in the* ***Helmand Valley****. Although the heavy airstrikes before the insurgents' withdrawal could have delayed the opium harvest, we believe that farmers had adequate time to harvest their opium because the airstrikes ended in early April.*

- ***Konarha Province*** *was the scene of fighting in February 1985. Most military operations in Konarha, however, occurred along the province's main roads in the valleys of the Darya-ye Konar and its major tributaries, the Landay Sind and the Darya-ye Pich. Although some airborne forces were used in the mountains,* [redacted] *analysis indicates little destruction of the terraced poppyfields.* 25X1

- ***Paktia and Paktika Provinces*** *have been the scene of constant battles as Soviet and Afghan troops have attempted to relieve insurgent pressure on regime outposts. The government conducted a blockade and sweep operation in Paktia in late October 1984, but we doubt that the poppy crop was damaged because many regime units here, hard pressed to hold their posts against guerrilla assaults, have little time to conduct massive field operations that could destroy crops. These provinces, however, have experienced considerable population loss that may have reduced poppy cultivation.* 25X1

- ***Kapisa and Laghman Provinces****, often the location of Soviet offensives, are mountainous with only scattered poppy cultivation on smaller-than-average fields in terraced agricultural areas. Farmers probably had difficulty planting or harvesting their fields because of the fighting, but we consider it unlikely that destroyed poppyfields in these areas will affect total Afghan production.* [redacted] 25X1

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outposts, border posts, military supply convoys, airports, and highways. Many insurgents are also part-time farmers, which tends to reduce hostilities during planting and harvesting seasons.

Processing. Evidence indicates that trafficking organizations in Afghanistan have had the capability to process opium into morphine and heroin since the mid-1970s

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We doubt that Afghan laboratories manufacture large amounts of pure heroin or compare in number with those in Pakistan.[4] Reporting about increased heroin refining activities involving Afghans began about three years after the Soviet invasion:

- In early 1983, DEA sources reported laboratories in Nangarhar Province, and other sources later corroborated the presence of the laboratories.
- By the fall of 1983, DEA had learned of the existence of at least 40 heroin laboratories in Nangarhar Province alone.
- In mid-1984, DEA reported the spread of laboratories to areas outside of Nangarhar Province—one near Kabul, four in Helmand Province, and nine in Ribat.[5]

We have received no reporting of any government crackdown on heroin refineries.

the proliferation of small heroin laboratories continues in Afghanistan. In March 1985, reliable DEA sources reported that many temporary laboratories were set up to process opium following the harvest in April. US Embassy sources in Kabul also claim that numerous heroin laboratories are located east of Kabul near the Afghan-Pakistani border.

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We judge that the increase in the number of heroin refineries reflects the traffickers' belief that Afghanistan's lawless, war-torn environment is ideal for refining heroin with impunity. DEA sources in Pakistan report that many heroin refiners have relocated to Afghanistan.

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We suspect that some laboratories also may be shifting from Pakistan to Afghanistan because of the increase in Afghan opium production and decrease in Pakistani cultivation.

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Other, more circumstantial evidence also suggests an increase in heroin processing in Afghanistan.

Soviet soldiers regularly barter items in the Afghan bazaars for heroin. Heroin powder is readily available in Afghan cities and frequently traded in the bazaars of Jalalabad, Qandahar, and Herat, as well as other cities and towns (Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, Towr Kham, Farah, and Zaranj), according to all available evidence. The distance of some of these locations from Pakistani laboratories suggests nearby refining in Afghanistan. DEA reporting also indicates that Pakistani authorities have seized heroin en route from Afghanistan.

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We believe that military operations have little effect on heroin refining activities in Afghanistan. Few laboratories are located in areas that are potential military targets, such as the important villages or major roadways. the laboratories are in remote mountain areas where government control is limited. Like Pakistani operations, most Afghan heroin laboratories are so-called garage or kitchen operations—easily established, crudely constructed, and using existing buildings in outlying villages and

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[4] Most heroin laboratories in Southwest Asia process raw opium into crude heroin base (Number 2 Heroin) or smoking heroin (Number 3 Heroin), but more laboratories are refining pure heroin (Number 4 Heroin), particularly in Pakistan. Pure heroin is also referred to as injectable heroin or heroin hydrochloride.

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[5] Ribat is a village somewhere in the Afghan-Iranian-Pakistani triborder area.

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